

Chris Abel. *The Extended Self: Architecture, Memes and Minds*

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Chris Abel's *The Extended Self* is a wide-ranging study that is clearly the result of extensive research across many disciplines over the course of many years. The defining feature of the text is its breadth. Abel attempts to bring together a dizzying number of heretofore disparate literatures in order to supplant “popular concepts of the self and free will as autonomous realms of being” with “a new theory of the ‘extended self’ as a complex and diffuse product of that coevolution, comprising both social and material elements, including built habitations and artifacts in general” (1). The resultant conception of the extended self allows Abel to articulate and navigate a tension at the heart of the present condition: “the same technological extensions that made *Homo sapiens* so successful now threaten the future of the race” (271).

The Extended Self is comprised of four parts and offers extensive endnotes spanning numerous academic and popular sources. The text also contains a number of illustrative images and figures, as well as helpful signposts at the end of each of the four parts. While Abel's opening lines are not cheerful—he begins: “little progress has been made in reducing the world's dependency on fossil fuels and averting catastrophic climate change” (1)—he does promise “a fresh look at the root causes of that dependency and their joint origins from the perspective of embodied minds and extended cognition” (ibid).

Part I explores the many inputs into the construction of human identity. Abel sets the tone for the rest of the book with a broad cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary analysis ranging from comparisons of architectural styles in American suburbia and Aboriginal Australia, to reflections on social neuroscience and embodied phenomenology. The central claim here is that identity is tied not just to the most intimate and immediate sense of self we have—our bodies—but also to our environment, broadly construed to include both its ‘natural’ and ‘built’ dimensions. Hence framing the project in terms of embodied minds and extended cognition, respectively.

With Abel's framework in place, Part II focuses on the most obvious way in which we extend ourselves: by using tools, artifacts, technology or, in a word, *technics*. The guiding concern here is the way in which technology can take on a developmental and evolutionary trajectory of its own, beyond its mere instrumentality. This is what Bernard Stiegler—on whom Abel leans heavily—calls the problem of “runaway technics” (72). Abel runs through many debates in contemporary cultural evolutionary theory—the gene/meme

analogy, the mechanisms of cultural transmission, the operative notion of replication, etc.—to show how much of this theorizing is unable to give a satisfactory account of biological and technological coevolution. Here again, Abel's analysis is sweeping, and ranges from Dawkins's *Extended Phenotype*, Varela and Maturana's autopoietic systems, De Landa and Durham's interactionism, to the spandrel debates invoked by Gould and Lewontin, Dennett, Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini, among others. Abel's facility with architectural history and theory makes for a rather humorous *dissolution* of this "debate" in a way that is worth the price of admission.

Where the first two parts of the book set up the problems of adequately theorizing the extended self, the last two set out to solve these problems. Perhaps the most significant contribution comes in Part III with Abel's original formulation of the *technical meme* and its conjunction with the notion of an assemblage. The former is defined as follows:

the human mind itself is a coevolutionary product of biology and technics, it follows that there are no memes that are *not* technical memes, that is to say, there are no memes that are not *exteriorized* in some way. Viewed in this light, *all buildings and other artifacts are embodied technical memes* of kind or another. (156, emphasis in original)

Abel's technical meme concept fills in some of the gaps identified in Part II, but cannot explain interactions among memes on its own. This is where, for Abel, the notion of assemblages is helpful. Though surely a fraught concept, Abel attempts to cash it out with an analysis of the spoked wheel, the automobile, and the freeway. In this context, Abel also adds a thought-provoking observation (with images, to boot) about how garages for private automobiles have largely replaced the (semi)public space of front porches in suburban architecture. This sort of analysis is a strength of the text, driving home the message that humans are not passive recipients of environmental influences, and that design is neither impotent nor value-free.

Part IV reiterates that technical memes and their assemblages are the "cardinal agents of cognitive extension and embodiment" (173) and raises what is perhaps the most important implications of the work: "once specific assemblages of technical memes are culturally entrenched, despite the potential or need for change, individuals and groups are often reluctant to give them up, so interwoven are their identities with those same assemblages" (219). By Abel's lights this is why, returning to the book's opening lines, the environmental crisis is so intractable.

In the end, it's hard to know if the breadth of *The Extended Self* is a virtue or a vice. Readers versed in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of biology can surely find a trove of new resources and references in Abel's engagement with theorists in design, architecture, and the philosophy of technology—and

I suspect the reverse would be true as well. However, Abel's writing is at times superficial and overly exegetical. In engaging with various empirical literatures, Abel too often relies on summaries of other philosophers' summaries of empirical work—a scholarly practice bound to create more confusion than clarity. Relatedly, it is sometimes unclear who the intended audience is, and so it can seem like debates about free will, consciousness, dualism, personal identity, etc. are being unnecessarily and unhelpfully run together.

Perhaps the biggest worry in this regard is the unacknowledged tension in the way the book is framed: embodied minds and extended cognition. Andy Clark, whom Abel cites approvingly, has pointed out that his own brand of the extended mind is perhaps incompatible with strong theories of embodiment.¹ In a sentence, one can't be committed to both (1) the thesis that anything fulfilling the appropriate functional role can constitute mental states or processes and (2) the thesis that idiosyncrasies of human embodiment make ineliminable contributions to mental states and processes. This is not to say that such a tension necessarily undermines the whole project, but it is rather one of many instances where a more careful and circumscribed approach could help to clarify the arguments on offer.

Despite these issues, I think what the book lacks in depth and precision, it ultimately makes up for in breadth and originality. Abel's text should thus be of interest to theorists of many stripes, especially those who lean anti-individualist, externalist, or interactionist. It would be hard to imagine reading *The Extended Self* and not coming away with new directions for future research.²

1. See Andy Clark's "Pressing the Flesh: A Tension in the Study of the Embodied, Embedded Mind" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76 (2008): 37–59. And for a response, see Dempsey and Shani's "Stressing the Flesh: In Defense of Strong Embodied Cognition" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86 (2013): 590–617.

2. Thanks to Billy Dean Goehring and Nicolae Morar for helpful conversations in writing this review.